

A NEW ERA FOR NONGOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UN?\*

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As so many have pointed out: the United Nations Charter starts with the words "We the peoples--"; but the rest is about states, and more particularly about governments.<sup>1</sup> Of course, if democratization remains a project for humankind as a whole, and that will hopefully last for a very long time, this introduces a hopeless discrepancy between ambitions and reality. The tension is hardly going to be solved by changing the charter; our training in hypocrisy informs us that we can live with this contradiction between ideal and reality rather than giving up the ideal. More probably, the tension is gradually going to be resolved by having nongovernmental organizations enter the UN system, for instance in accordance with Article 22 of the Charter,<sup>2</sup> in some kind of formalized, visible even highly visible, institutionalized setting, bringing people closer to states.

In historical retrospect future generations will look back at the institution of "consultative status" (A, B, C and even less formalized relationships) and the CONGO (Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations) as transitional stages. We are in those stages today, and in almost all United Nations' organizations the distance between diplomats and NGO representatives working, lobbying or both, within the framework provided by the organization is visible even to the naked eye. A pattern of conspicuous consumption, for instance in the way of dressing by the former, and conspicuous sacrifice of the latter. We, the governments, versus we, the peoples. The Mercedes versus the bicycle; the three piece suit versus the blue jeans.

But behind this is a reality which is interesting. Openly admitted in many quarters in the United Nation's system: NGOs are

indispensable as the highly concrete mechanisms through which resolutions and programs of the UN system can be put into practice.<sup>3</sup> Of course, governments are and will for a very long time remain the major vehicles. But they may be remote from social reality, may not reach enough, and also be incapable of mobilizing support for human rights, education and health campaigns, environmental action, peace and disarmament education, etc. NGOs reach more deeply into the social structure. An alternative to NGOs would actually be local level government, the municipal level, but ~~then~~ the relationship to the United Nations becomes weak when channeled through national governments. NGOs have some structural similarity to the UN; a local government not (but an NGO of local governments does).<sup>4</sup>

In short, NGOs are indispensable because they may be the only world network, and an impressive one when taken in its totality, with something approaching efficiency--the level certainly varying very much from one country to the other.<sup>5</sup> But in saying so a second point can immediately be made: the more efficient the NGO system and the more it is made use of by the United Nations, the more will governmental jealousies be stimulated. NGOs become direct carriers of important messages from the international community. Many, even most of these messages carry a deeper and more important message: governments have failed in carrying out important jobs. The examples just mentioned<sup>6</sup> are sufficient to make this point: the UN system is, in fact, signalling that where governments have failed non-governments have to enter, trying to carry out, or carry on, with the job. Of course, one may be entitled to expect the inhuman, but the human usually comes first: even if the resolution has been voted with

an overwhelming majority governmental enthusiasm may be waning or lacking completely when faced with armies of eager beavers from the national, not to mention the international NGO community, at work. The pattern of conspicuous sacrifice pitted against conspicuous consumption of governmental employees will not make this better, particularly if the people in general take note of the difference then start making something out of it. The UN Secretariat may be caught in the middle, some more leaning to the NGO side, some more to the GO (government organization); probably depending on their career pattern.<sup>7</sup>

At this point a third factor enters the picture: an unholy alliance across the political spectrum against NGOs, at the governmental level. Conservative governments may be skeptical about NGOs because of the causes they espouse, particularly if these causes in any way should challenge the status quo. And socialist governments may be skeptical about NGOs not so much because of their causes, here they may actually agree, but because of the nongovernmentalism; "socialism" so often being state-ism. In addition Third world governments, perhaps neither capitalist, nor socialist, or both, may also be skeptical about NGOs for a very good reason: they see in the NGOs a way in which the First world reproduces itself, even by cloning. Even if there are nuances between government and nongovernment Third world people may be more sensitized to similarities than to differences--in addition to taking note of the obvious fact that headquarters, executive committees, general secretaries, and so on tend to be from the First world.

And yet there is no doubt that NGOs differ from governments, and also from corporations. In principle NGOs are non-profit; they

may be interested in economic affairs but not themselves exercising economic power with economic means. And in principle NGOs are non-violent, they may be interested in military affairs (pro or contra) but not themselves exercising military power with military means. Nongovernmental organizations are specializing in the other two forms of power, cultural in a very broad sense and political, concerned with consciousness and organization. These are both rather important, and sometimes preliminaries to the exercise of economic and military power, but not themselves direct examples of how economic and military power are exercised in our world.

However, during the last decade or so an important new phenomenon has arrived on the scene: terrorism, even terrorism international (TI) and state terrorism, even state terrorism international (STI).<sup>8</sup> Both of them are deviations from what has come to be seen as the legitimate use of violence: TI being the coordinated exercise of violence as a weapon of the weak against strong governments; STI being the obvious response, the organized exercise of illegitimate violence by those very same strong governments. No doubt these are nongovernmental and governmental organizations respectively, but they may not enter the Yearbook of International Organizations for these reasons. In that Yearbook we find other types of organizations also with tremendous power, such as, for instance, the Catholic Church an entry possibly not appreciated by the Vatican seeing the church next to all kinds of organizations as a profanization of the sacred.

Let me then turn to the second topic: not so much reflections on the nature of nongovernmental organizations as a problem of major significance right now. "What can the NGOs do for the United Nations" is more important than the question "What can the United Nations do for the NGOs". In order to explore this permit me to make use of a set of eight proposals I find significant in the current UN situation<sup>9</sup> (which I will not necessarily refer to as a "crisis"), simply as a checklist in order to see more clearly the potential of the NGOs.<sup>10</sup>

First, there is a financial aspect to the UN crisis which stems mainly from the circumstance that one particular contributor, the United States, is responsible for 25% of the basic budget and can hold the UN to ransom by refusing to pay or delaying the payment. This situation is intolerable, the US contribution should be reduced to a more appropriate level. But if this happens the NGOs should also be prepared for one eventuality in case they enter the UN system in a more institutionalized manner: to pay their dues. Some of them are wealthy enough to do this. The sums may not be that high, but in this pattern there will also be a way in which strong NGOs can subsidize the weaker ones.

Second, UN salaries tend to be too high, they could be cut (for instance by 30%). At this point the NGOs might help considerably by giving a different model of international dedication. The classical model is derived from international diplomacy, traditionally the prerogative of aristocrats well endowed, some time ago even

paying their own salaries. This set an unfortunate style: inter-national relations = upper class relations including, even more traditionally, royal family inter-marriages. In the NGOs more ordinary people are working, much like international civil servants for that matter. But the problem has been that the latter have tended to copy diplomats rather than the volunteers working in NGOs. A more complete exposure to the NGO scene may change this, to the better, in the direction of democracy rather than aristocracy.

Third, the UN ought to no longer serve as a dumping ground for failed politicians. There has been this unfortunate tradition, and particularly at the high levels of the international civil service ranking scale. With more attention given to the NGOs the UN would be exposed to successful non-politicians rather than to unsuccessful politicians, presumably a change for the better although one should not underestimate the positive impact "failed" politicians may have on an organization whose fate it nevertheless is to deal with governments. Their experience and contacts may be invaluable.

Fourth, what I have referred to as "dewaldheimization" of the United Nations, trying to correct for the tendency to put at the top of the system people so obedient to governments of whatever kind that the United Nations will not be able to play one of its most important roles, a point-counterpoint ballet (or whatever metaphor one might like to use) relative to governments. Needless to say this would be the major strength of an increased role for

the NGOs and for that reason also a resented one, by the governments: NGOs will act out nongovernmental perspectives, tell people in the world in general about what is missing, about the kinds of things governments are not doing well. Although this will not be the only content of their message governments will shine less.

Fifth, the head of the typical UN agency, a Director General or an Executive Secretary has tended to loom too high. The role should be played down. This certainly would not apply to the Secretary General of the United Nations itself: if any change one might argue the direction of more, not less visibility and strength. But the Director General of a UN agency tends to run the place like a feudal fief and is assumed to do so by the charter of the agency; it is built into the role from the very beginning, so to speak. A heavier NGO presence in an agency would make this more difficult for the simple reason that NGO personnel would not be paid by the organization, not tied by strings of obedience, discipline and confidentiality much beyond what is functional for the normal organization. This may also serve to liberate much of the creative energy of the UN Secretariat.<sup>11</sup>

Sixth, take the United Nations out of the United States. This is the only idea which works negatively. There are two positive points to be mentioned in connection with the present location in New York, apart from the obvious entertainment value New York always has, of many different kinds. New York is not the nation's capital meaning that the UN is not surrounded by an ordinary Corps Diplomatique: the consuls general in the UN environment are hardly a very domineering force. And the second advantage is that metropolitan



New York, one of the major cities in the world, is so rich already in NGOs that the United Nations is embedded in an ocean of NGOs, sometimes almost inundating the place. The exposure is dense and deep.

The conclusion to be drawn might be exactly this: not to put the United Nations in a capital. Thus, Geneva is a better choice than Vienna to mention the other two major UN cities; Berlin would be a better choice than London or Paris or Rome. And the other consideration would be to place the United Nations in a rich NGO environment with no hope that one can easily make up for the density offered by New York in this connection. But it might be less US dominated.

However, the real point is not touched by these considerations. The real point is institutionalization of the NGO presence, not only ability to run a rich variety of offerings for diplomats and their families and for the civil servants from the NGO part of the world. And this institutionalization can take place even if the surroundings are not NGO saturated. One might even say that if they were it would be unfair to the governments; they might want more governmental presence in that case and compensate by insisting on location in a capital with a number of embassies well above 60 or 70.

Seven, abolish the Security Council. This would be entirely in line with NGO thinking: if the nation-state is to be downplayed (certainly not to zero) the big nation-state should be even more so. One way of doing this would certainly be to abolish the

Security Council, a step that will have to be taken sooner or later, in line with the general move towards democratization.

Eight, the states should share power with non-states. This of course, brings up the basic question: what do we have in the world besides states? Which are the subtypes under the heading "non-states"? There are certainly not only nongovernmental organizations, but inter-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, local level government and just, simply, people. And after that: animals, plants, minerals, water and air. Space. Obviously, all of this is under-represented. Thus, there has to be a way in which nonhuman nature is represented by humans, for instance by having human beings pick up their own constituency in the animal, plant and mineral "kingdoms", doing one's best to represent their interests.<sup>12</sup>

Basically this leaves us with four types of non-states: NGOs,<sup>13</sup> INGOs, INCs, and people. Elsewhere<sup>14</sup> I have argued in favor of one chamber for each, seeing no reason why one or two of these groups should be favored at the expense of the others. However, there may be chambers of articulation and chambers of decision-making. The argument might be made that the most important chamber for the latter would be the Chamber of peoples; the "we the people" chamber as opposed to the general assembly of the United Nations, "we the governments" chamber. To be fully present on tap, if not on top, is already quite a lot. At later stages in the evolution of the world system other structures might be considered, but we are hardly there yet. And one reason for this, as Professor Merle has

pointed out so well in UIA settings<sup>15</sup> is that there are NGOs and, NGOs.

In an other paper five dimensions for selecting NGOs have been given, they will not be repeated here.<sup>16</sup> Attention will only be paid to one dimension in addition, not among the five: the level of freshness, of ability to address the problems of today (which may differ from the problems of yesterday) and the problems as seen by the more foresighted ones, the problems of tomorrow. It would be sad, indeed, if a Chamber of NGOs would not give adequate articulation possibilities to such new nongovernmental forces as the new peace movement, the development networks that are taking shape between first and third world countries, the environment networks, the human rights organizations, the new religious movements-regardless of what one might think of them. All of these are cut out of our time, some of them more, some of them less well organized.

**T**hey could bring into the United Nations the fresh blood and the fresh air so badly needed, hence no pretext should be accepted that would lock them out. By comparison: some years ago it would be impermissible to think about an NGO chamber without paying very much respect to trade unions and cooperative movements. And they should certainly be in it today even if their ideas are no longer new, their perspectives are old and have been tested and some of them have gone stale, overtaken by events and transformations. On the other hand again, not any movement that claims to possess the key to the future, capable of opening the gates to Utopia should easily be admitted either.

So, what could one expect from a transformation of this kind? I think it would be wrong to draw too many conclusions from what we know up to today from NGOs in a UN context, within the framework of consultative status and CONGO. They have not been exposed so far to the limelight of real world publicity. The basic idea would be that they would have to prepare themselves much better-- be even better informed, more imaginative, more able to turn ideas into concrete practice.

In so doing a healthy triangular competition will be brought a step further: between governments, the UN Secretariat and the NGOs (GO-INGO-NGO)--in producing the best papers leading to resolutions; and, in being able to implement the resolutions. Alliance formations may be a likely outcome with the UN Secretariat holding the balance of this type of cultural--political power--idea power and decision power. The UN Secretariat is owned by the governments and, in turn, house the NGOs. They may unleash NGO power against GO power, gaining some latitude for themselves by pleading innocence to the governments (the NGOs did this, not we!) and activity to the NGOs (we gave you a forum!). The great UN conferences of the 1970s and 1980s have already been used that way--skillfully.

Maybe the promise of a new dynamism, as always in something dynamic with an element of conflict, is what holds most promise for the future? Not NGOs alone, nor the UN, nor the governments, but a new interplay between the three of them! <sup>17</sup>

## N O T E S

\* Paper presented at the meeting of the Union of International Associations, Brussels, 28 November 1986 while the author was Senior Special Fellow of UNITAR, New York. The responsibility for all views expressed in the paper is mine alone.

[1] "WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" -- those are the first words of the Charter of the United Nations. The last passage of the preamble mentions "our respective Governments", Article 1 talks about nations and Article 2 about Members (capital initial, as for Government, but not for nation) and in Article 3 it becomes very clear that Members are states.

[2] "The General Assembly may establish such subsidiary organs as it deems necessary for the performance of its functions" - a very open formulation. And according to Article 71 "The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence" - another open formulation that has given a basis for establishing consultative status for 491 organizations with ECOSOC.

[3] The Federation des villes jumelées, Paris, may be one example.

[4] This theme is very well documented in the report by Martin Ennals, **Relations Between the United Nations (Intergovernmental Bodies And Secretariat) and Non-governmental Organizations**, London, July 1986. Also see the paper by the UN Secretariat, **Relations Between the United Nations and Non-Governmental Organizations in the Economic And Social Fields**, UN, New York.

[5] This phenomenon is amply documented, in the field of development, in the **Dossier** published by the International Federation for Development Alternatives, Nyon, Switzerland.

[6] The most famous, and rightly so, example right now undoubtedly the Nobel Prize winner Amnesty International, with an other Nobel Prize winner, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, IPPNW, being an other.

[7] Nation-building being a major project in many new nations a governmental career will naturally be very attractive, and not only for economic reasons.

[8] By state terrorism is meant state-supported terrorism, not, for instance (nuclear) balance of terror policies as practised by the super powers. For one analysis, focussing on US supported state terrorism, see E. S. Herman, **The Real Terror Network**, South End Press, Boston, 1982. For, so to speak, the opposite perspective, see B. Netanyahu, **Terrorism: How the West Can Win**, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986. Terrorism is mentioned here as an

antidote to the frequently found mind-set according to which IGOs and NGOs are "good" whereas governments when acting alone are "bad".

[9] Johan Galtung, "The United Nations Today: Problems and Some Proposals - And Some Remarks on the Nordic Countries", Center for European Studies, CUNY, New York, November 1986.

[10] The reader is referred to the two documents mentioned in footnote 2 above for a variety of ideas in this connection.

[11] Very useful in this connection is **The UN -Its Staff -Its Future: 13 Proposals for the Future**, Geneva, June 1986, based on 900 replies to a questionnaire sent to UN civil servants October 1985 on the occasion of the UN 40th anniversary. The survey gives an image of a staff both devoted and enthusiastic, but also demotivated by a feeling that their competencies are badly utilized "The harsh judgment, in particular towards the supervisors, can be linked to the lack of information and also the lack of consultation which seems to prevail in each division" (p. 5).

[12] See "The United Animal Nations", **Transnational Associations**, 1984, no. 1, pp. 38-41. To many this may sound rather bizarre. But the idea is little but the idea of trusteeship for animals rather than for human beings, with all the dangers this implies - but also with positive potentials.

[13] NGOs should then include representation of the local level (municipalities, etc.) and nature, including the animal world.

[14] "International Organizations And World Decision-Making", talk given at the Executive Committee Meeting, Union of International Associations, Brussels, 26 April 1986; printed in **Transnational Associations**, 1986 No. 4, pp. 220-24.

[15] At the meeting mentioned in the footnote above.

[16] The paper mentioned in footnote 12 above. The problems are

- is the organization internationally representative?
- is the organization sufficiently democratic?
- is the organization concerned with general human interests?
- is the organization capable of reflecting world perspectives?
- does the organization have a certain permanence?

[17] After all, is that not what modern democracy is about, an interplay between the prince, the clergy, the aristocrats and the people, as Marc Nerfin has pointed out (**Dossier**, no. 58)